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Barbara STANWYCK

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Dedicated to Mr. Alan Kelk and his English Literature lessons in Broomefield, Cheadle Hulme School

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BALL OF FIRE (1941)
THE LADY EVE (1941)

Barbara Stanwyck's two finest comedy performances are in *Ball of Fire* (1941) and *The Lady Eve* (1941). In both, she deceives or cons gullible men (Gary Cooper, Henry Fonda), and falls in love with them. Despite the adulation of director Howard Hawks's work, and the critical treatments of it, *Ball of Fire* has received relatively little attention, overshadowed by Hawks's other justly celebrated comedy of the period, *Bringing up Baby* (1938), to which it bears some resemblance (vigorous, flexible woman enlivens leaden, stiff professor). Robin Wood's short account of it in his book on the director is strangely constricted – not unlike the eight academics writing the encyclopaedia that the film pokes fun at – and hardly recognises it as a comedy. The account, built around Hawks's 'unusual gentleness' towards the professors, one of the director's much loved 'groups', is jejune and sentimental – or more generously, it chooses to emphasise and elevate the sentimental strands in the film – and ignores the film's playfully, and affectedly, roguish and mischievous tone (2006 [1968]: 96). He barely mentions Stanwyck, a strange omission because her presence within the group, and her interplay with Gary Cooper, produce the film's *jouissance*. James Harvey's extensive and intimate treatment of romantic comedy deals with Stanwyck and Hawks separately but does not mention the film (1998 [1987]). It is possible that, like Gerald Mast, author of an accomplished critical assessment of Hawks's films, he did not care

much for it, and quietly avoided it. Mast outlines some of his reasons for sidelining the film. Interestingly, although he does not mention Wood's account, he takes the contrary view that, far from Hawks exhibiting 'unusual gentleness', these bookish characters and their world are 'rendered … so unsympathetically' (1982: 357). As a consequence, the film is crude and imprecise, and for Mast, 'the fingerprints of [Samuel] Goldwyn's smeary hand have been smudged all over [it] – in its oversized, cavernously huge library where the professors are supposed to work …; in its rhythm, which feels two or three beats slower than the usual Hawks pace' (356).

A couple of other elements further support Mast's argument. Firstly, lurking in 'oversized' and 'cavernously', there is the photography of Gregg Toland, whose predilection for staging in depth looks to be at odds with Hawks's preference for a lighter, ingenuous, less mannered composition. The layering of planes impedes fluency, what Manny Farber calls Hawks's 'mellifluous motion' (2009 [1969]: 655). Andrew Britton also notes the clash: 'Brittle artificiality is … the term … for the deep-focus compositions in *Ball of Fire* (1941), which could hardly be more inert and academic … Howard Hawks, as we might expect, is not interested in deep focus … the shots … are patently un-Hawksian' (2009 [1989]: 429). Secondly, also weighing heavily, are attitudes and strategies from the script/screenplay by Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett. There is a clever-clever, emotionally detached tone, and a cartoonish reduction with characters and situations thickly outlined. Dan Callahan tersely summarises: '[It is] a movie … working at cross purposes between Wilder's Berlin sarcasm, Toland's pictorial solemnity, Cooper's mannered cuteness, and Hawks's cool indifference' (2012: 139).

Especially noteworthy is the Wilder/Brackett dialogue, which contradicts the Hawks style as Mast describes it elsewhere in his book: 'restrained, natural, underplayed, understated … it is the spareness of Hawks's dialogue that gives his world its aroma, flavor, and texture' (48). Prof. Bertram Potts, played by Gary Cooper, first visits Stanwyck's character, Sugarpuss O'Shea, in her dressing room. This follows her nightclub rendition, with the Gene Krupa orchestra no less, of the song 'Drum Boogie', including a spooky, whispery, miniature version, where a huddle of hushed voices is kept in time by matchsticks snaring on the sandy, striking surface of a matchbox. Potts has come to investigate her use of slang but she mistakenly thinks he is the DA on her case, after being warned by a couple of hoodlums (one of whom is Duke Pastrami, played by Dan Duryea) that the heat is on because of her association with a gangster (Joe Lilac, played by Dana Andrews). She snorts a series of tough-talking, slangy outbursts: 'Cut the corners, what is it?'; 'Get this – I don't know from nothing'; 'Suppose you tell the DA to take a nice running jump for himself'; 'Are you a bull or aren't you?'; and 'shove in your clutch'. Captivating and intriguing though these lines are in themselves, the problem is that they are *so* highlighted, so deliberately *there* to deliver, rather *too* entertaining in themselves; there is this line, then this line, one after another, a list of discrete phrases to be recited by the performer. Such dialogue is ideal for a one-dimensional hoodlum like Pastrami who is a mouthpiece for the boss, and where such speech is part of a threatening and alienating patter, but Stanwyck and her character look awkward acting as mouthpieces for the scriptwriters. The lines come from outside her, and too conspicuously from outside the film.

On the other hand, given that Sugarpuss fears that Prof. Potts is the DA, it may be appropriate that her lines are stiff and unyielding. They are a front, to hold off invasive men, and render her invulnerable. Learnt on the street, they are rehearsed and ready to be deployed. Moreover, if it all sounds a little too much like the Dictionary of Slang Phraseology being declaimed, then that is how the professor might hear it, each word or phrase a definitive *example*. The dialogue may be too constructed and Stanwyck's delivery too much a demonstration, but this creates an amusing pedagogical air

to the proceedings. It reveals the range of vocabulary and the possibilities for a grammar of slang: compelling his departure, Sugarpuss tells him to 'scrow, scram, scraw', and although he does as he is told, he departs in delight at her 'complete conjugation'. Furthermore, although the comedy of cross-purposes is contrived, like a sketch or routine performed by a double act, and (comes across as) too premeditated, it contains lines that are smartly dovetailed. Sugarpuss says, referring to her knowledge of a crime, 'Get this – I don't know from nothing', to which Prof. Potts replies, referring to her knowledge of slang, 'but you do – every word you say proves as much'.

The rigidities of the film could therefore provide opportunities for Stanwyck. For Molly Haskell, far from being an uncomfortable mix of artistic temperaments, '*Ball of Fire* is a perfect fusion of Hawks' dialectics and those of [the scriptwriters] … When Barbara Stanwyck as a fast-talking gangster's moll invades the sanctuary of a group of lexicographers … it is as if Hawks had recognised the sclerotic danger of male camaraderie – and was resisting it' (1987 [1973]: 210). It is clear that Sugarpuss's 'vitality stimulates the professors' capacity for spontaneous enjoyment' (Wood: 97), but equally the 'vitality' of Stanwyck's performance stimulates the more stolid, slow-witted, and hollow aspects of the film's narrative shape, style and construction (highlighted by Mast). The film is set up for Stanwyck to finesse, and this contributes to the reflexive and meta-filmic aspects of the comedy. In one scene, the professors, inspired by Sugarpuss, are trying to work out the moves of a dance, by way of compound fractions and complex mathematical chalk markings on the floor. The film uses extreme deep focus shots with one professor's face in the foreground (he is standing legs wide apart, strained and rigid) and the remaining group much further back. The Toland version of this compositional style is normally associated with fraught melodramas (those of William Wyler or Orson Welles) so it feels incongruous to see it used in a comedy, or for comic effect.

Nevertheless, the forced composition matches the professors' straining, and perhaps mocks it, and the style itself, recognising its contrivances, may be undergoing a touch of self-parody. When Sugarpuss enters the group to teach them by example, the new shot is more relaxed, and the extreme planes of deep focus composition disappear. She breaks down the artificiality of the professors *and* the composition. Is she Hawks's secret agent, smuggling in his preferred compositional style?

If the film is testing Stanwyck's powers of resuscitation – a Hawksian task, perhaps – the sense of it being *brought to life* is enhanced by the evocation of antecedents. On the run from the police, Sugarpuss decides to take the professor up on his offer as a ruse so that she may use their 'cavernous' abode as a hideout. As the professors scurry off in awe of this visiting creature, and later creep round doors and staircases to peek at her fascinations, we realise that we are watching an adaptation, or reworking, of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. (However, they are not all small, there are eight of them, unless Potts is Prince Charming, and, unlike the Broadway play and Walt Disney versions of the story, their names are not signifiers of their dominant character traits – Professors Potts, Gurkakoff, Jerome, Magenbruch, Robinson, Quintana, Oddly and Peagram – played respectively by Gary Cooper, Oskar Homolka, Henry Travers, S.Z. Sakall, Tully Marshall, Leonid Kinskey, Richard Haydn and Aubrey Mather.) Sugarpuss escapes the nasty and horrid, real world of gangsters and cops, and takes refuge in their 'sanctuary'. Here, she becomes unusually animated, and colours their dull existence. It should be a treat to have these subsidiary supporting actors, familiar friends, all in one place, although, unfortunately, having them all in one place is self-cancelling, as they too eagerly, and too pleasingly, accentuate the limited traits of their characters. No doubt a-good-idea-at-the-time, they are too self-consciously gathered together, and their character actor qualities are drowned out in all the noise declaring them to be Character Actors. For Wood, they are treated

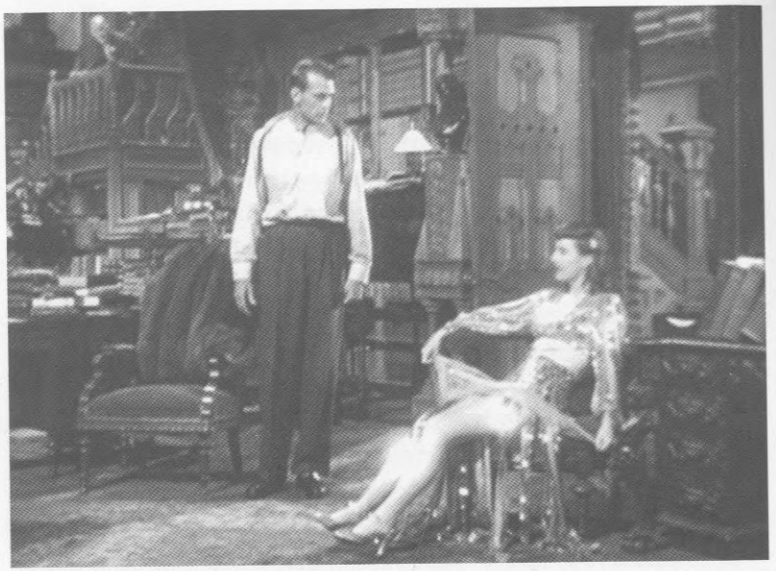
by the film with 'unusual gentleness' but this could equally be seen as indulgence as they are reduced, with the odd exception, to childish men, or inexperienced boys, all nervous and wide-eyed in the presence of a pretty girl. Haskell says that, on occasions, Hawks betrays 'the sensibility of an arrested adolescent' (although, for her, *Ball of Fire* fights against these impulses [209]). It is not easy to tell whether Hawks and Wilder are using the professors' kindly, cartoonish nature to satirise lasciviousness's, avuncular disguise, or hide behind it themselves. There is no denying the sniggering. The name Snow White may have suggested virginal promise, but unlike Sugarpuss does not advertise the sweet taste of the heroine's genitalia. (The polite definition of 'puss', provided by the film, is 'face', as in 'sourpuss'.) Nevertheless, as far as Stanwyck is concerned, there will be more to it, as she turns out to be sweet in other ways. If that sounds a little too much like the 'tart with a heart', for the performer it is an opportunity, once again, to combine opposing character traits such that they seem vibrantly compatible (sweet *and* sour). She also revivifies clichés, not by knowingly playing with them, but by individualising characteristics, and authenticating them. The mere thought of the stereotype feels impertinent.

The film most explicitly admits its fairy-tale heritage in a dazzling revelation. Potts removes Sugarpuss's large fur coat to expose her dress that is sparkling, *really*, *really* sparkling. Accompanied by wispy music, she is an apparition. When he turns around to see her, Cooper, startled, does a little hop back, and seeing the dainty movement by this tall, heavy, rugged man is itself a little startling. This is not simply the standard sexy image of the slim woman suddenly, yet predictably, revealed in seductive garb because the erotic sight is also magical or supernatural. She is a glow-worm (not a bookworm) with twinkling globules seemingly generated by electricity – balls of fire – and, although we have seen her in this dress before, only now does it appear charged. Particularly incongruous against all the dusty tomes, this excessive image may be taken as a

bizarre sight gag playing on the disturbing appearance of the pulsating woman, and on the awe of the palpitating adolescent who sees Woman not only as 'other' but as other-worldly.

Sugarpuss is unsettling, not simply because she is an eroticised, beautiful woman, but because she *makes light*. Stanwyck's agility and humour, not attributes given to everything that is beautiful or erotic, play against stolidity, fixity, and convention. The man is limited, slow, and naïve and the woman is nimble, quick-witted and experienced. When Potts initially opens the front door, Sugarpuss's greeting – a casual salute, a wink and a click of her mouth – acknowledges her surprise visit, and is a little too sophisticated and coded for the literal-minded professor. Rather than a well-worn series of moves, throughout her sojourn with the professors, she is flexible and idiosyncratic. The necessity for deception does not inhibit Sugarpuss's behaviour – on the contrary, it gives her freedom to improvise, and this is the same in *The Lady Eve*, as we will see, when Jean reels in Charles Pike (Henry Fonda). In both films, the behaviour of her characters is not straightforwardly or narrowly geared towards securing the overriding goal or objective, conning the men, which the films have initially established (hence, paradoxically, aiding the duplicity). This is further complicated by the fact that during this process, in both films, she is falling in love with her 'mark'. However, for lengthy periods of the exchanges with her leading men, Sugarpuss and Jean do not divulge this, or indicate whether they are even conscious of it, thus charging all their seductions with ambiguity. In Stanwyck's hands, the initial fraudulence is an opportunity to combine different types of deceptive behaviour, criminal and non-criminal, each one a version of another. It is joyously slippery.

As we have seen, many of Stanwyck's performances explore the tension between accommodation and individuality, and each genre provides different circumstances and possibilities for this exploration. After flicking through a huge volume on Greek



philosophy, Sugarpuss moves across the room to find a chair, and stretches out. Silky, shiny and slinky though she is, with her long bare legs outstretched, we are invited to see not simply an object of desire but a body that need not be stiff, that self-confidently makes itself comfortable. The hurried removal of her stockings is brazenly practical. She does not wilfully disturb formalities, earnest attitudes or obstructing objects and furniture (as Katharine Hepburn's Susan does exhilaratingly in *Bringing Up Baby*) but somehow finds her way through, finds a way of making use of things. She makes herself at home.

Sugarpuss uses her sexuality at the same time as she neutralises it, or confuses it (after all, as she says, 'This is the first time that anybody moved in on my brain'). She must effectively draw the men in, but then reduce the effect to something unthreatening and homely. Drawn they are, for while Potts and Sugarpuss talk in the foreground, the deep focus lets us see the little people pop up in the

background, at different doorways, increasing imperceptibly, more like the forest animals in Disney's version of the fairy tale than the dwarfs themselves. They approach the pair accompanied, suitably enough, by Mickey Mousing, pizzicato music, and they surround her, and seal her off. We can now watch her perform within the enclosure. One of Hawks's favourite dramatic situations, much celebrated by his commentators, is to set up the group as a laboratory of human behaviour; Farber writes of characters being 'strangely pinned in place by the idea of people being linked together in tight therapeutic groups' (654). Yet here, while the men remain constrained by their limited character actor personas, her behaviour remains open to possibility. Sugarpuss appears to be inspired by the claustrophobia. Her encirclement rhymes with the whispery 'Drum Boogie' sequence with the audience in the nightclub tightly folded in, nearly swallowing her, and yet she held her own, secure, strong, the focus of the group. Now, stockings removed, she beckons, outstretches her leg, and gifts the phallus, but only so that Potts can appreciate how cold her feet are! She tells the professors to look into her mouth, guiding them towards the painted hole, but only so they may see her inflamed throat! (They are sympathetic yet, being academics, are slow to get to the point, so she needs to insist, with the typically Wilderesque, stand-up comic line, that 'It's as red as *The Daily Worker* and just as sore'.) A common Stanwyck strategy, which she shares with some of the other great female performers of the period, is to take simplistic images or outlines of female sexuality provided by the movies and flesh them out with a variety of modulating qualities (charm, intelligence, wit, irony, sensitivity, seriousness, poignancy). In this comic environment, she merges both the sexual and non-sexual aspects of teasing, in order to lead the men on.

These qualities are best exemplified in the sequence with Professor Potts, when he tells Sugarpuss that she should leave the house because she is too distracting, and she must persuade him to

let her stay. The shooting style is straightforward, more characteristically Hawksian, and yet one can see something elaborate being enabled, what Farber refers to, in relation to Hawks's films generally, as 'personality-revealing motion' and the 'geography of gesture' (656). At first, she is sitting in an armchair, fiddling with her new engagement ring from Lilac, and then she gets up and lollops away from him, pulling at her fingers in front of her waist saying, 'There is a lot of words we haven't caught up with'. This looser pace contrasts to her sharp turnaround as she throws out her right arm to point on 'for instance' (after which she parks her fist on her hip). Meanwhile, she rests her left arm on the trolley of huge books. As she translates the phrase, 'get you on the Ameche' – 'get you on the telephone' – she raises this arm, gesticulates in a circle to round off the explanation with a flourish, and ornaments it with a curlicue as her curved finger comes to rest on her cheek. For Haskell, 'Hawks's women have a passion to do, to accomplish, to hold their own … an

instinct for self-preservation translated into the motion of the mind, into verbal wit' (138–9). There is also a range and vibrancy of gesture, moving with the words, accompanying them, and representing the 'motion of the mind'. Despite being absorbed into the flow, Sugarpuss's gestures are distinctive; and despite being part of an act, they are instinctive. They are accentuated, part of her calculated performance of persuasion but, swift and supple, they are neither declamatory nor mannered. They have a restrained bravura.

Over the short period of their exchange, Stanwyck mixes and matches tones. When Potts says, 'Make no mistake, I shall regret the absence of your keen mind …', her face looks mildly concerned and disconcerted, and her eyes move ever so slightly to peruse him circumspectly while he is turned away. Yet, before he has completed the sentence – '… unfortunately, it is inseparable from an extremely disturbing body' – she shifts attitude, whistling mockingly as he says 'body'. A little later, she comes on all broodingly seductive, nestles up close to him, deepens her voice, and fixes her eyes insistently on his face (and Stanwyck's eyes alone are capable of deft variation). This is an actress who was equally comfortable in a range of film genres, and she could call upon any aspect of them to inflect the one she currently inhabited. When he admits that he applied cold water to his neck, her response – 'A little sun on my hair and *you had to water your neck*' – is all at once patronising, pitying, and threatening, as though she were suddenly a sinister character in a thriller. These tonal adjustments ensure that the drama does not settle, nor settle the matter of veracity and motivation.

This irresolution is further stimulated by Sugarpuss's inscrutability. When he says, 'I too have been acutely aware of your presence' she looks up in hope. She may be sensing a new vulnerability *or* she may be genuinely pleased, flattered and stimulated by his desire. The trickery and the growing attraction are simultaneous and cannot be disentangled. They sit comfortably together because dissembling and withholding are common

behavioural traits in the early stages of courtship. For these comedies, desires are discovered, and relationships born, in deceit and manipulation. Only a few minutes before, when Sugarpuss met Lilac's heavies briefly outside the house, she was contemptuous of the professors and anxious to depart. So who's she fooling? This film and *The Lady Eve* show the conning scenario to be ideal for dramatising the obscurities of attraction and seduction.

The film provides a twisting variation on the 'playacting for real' that Haskell recognises '[i]n Hawks' best films … men and women thrusting themselves ironically at each other, auditioning for acceptance but finding out in the process who they really are' (211). Stanwyck does most of the ironic 'thrusting'. This is one reason why *Ball of Fire* does not offer the 'dazzling battles of word, innuendo, glance, and gesture – between Grant and Hepburn, Grant and Jean Arthur, Grant and Rosalind Russell, John Barrymore and Carole Lombard, Bogart and Bacall, Wayne and Angie Dickinson, Rock Hudson and Paula Prentiss – [the] Utopian procrastinations to avert the paraphernalia of released love that can only expend itself' that David Thomson celebrates in other films by Hawks (1995 [1975]: 322). The film is one-sided with Cooper acting as the straight man. There is little repartee or jousting to enjoy, instead we watch her play off him. Sugarpuss works Potts, of course, but Stanwyck also *works around* Cooper. The danger for the performer with all the moves is that she will overwork, straining to keep the material lively in the face of a co-star who must necessarily remain restricted. Moreover, the temptation in situations of sexual duplicity, especially, but not only, in comedies, is for film and female performer to exaggerate the seduction, taking it to the edge of licentious grotesquery. She is not trapped in one crude register. Potts remains in the foreground of the shot, dark and heavy, as Sugarpuss moves away from him and up to the window area. It is the beginning of an unhurried, alluring parade, but it is also delicate and cool. She sways gently, without swishing. Her dress is light both in weight and colour and, in contrast to the

showy glow-worm outfit, relatively demure. Toned down, however, she appears more provocative, and not simply because of the potency of sexual restraint, or the connotations of the girl wandering in summer, dreamy, and nonchalant. More specifically, she presents the fantasy of the showgirl whose pornographic image is humanised and, assimilated into the ordinary, is more, and less, available, and therefore ambivalently eroticised.

Stanwyck's sexualising of proceedings sidesteps tonal expectations. When she reaches the window area, she turns on the spot, like a catwalk model, appropriating another genre of females on show – in order to remodel it. What we see, as the film cuts to a closer shot – as if separating the moment, pinpointing it, holding it up – is neither the fashion model's deadpan, empty mask nor a winking, come-hither, but a surprisingly sedate and sober face. Instead of Sugarpuss mocking the image that had so perturbed him – when, during the previous afternoon, according to him, and unseen

by us, she happened to stand against the window with the sunlight in her hair – or vulgarising it, she poses so that it can be regarded with gravity (by him, and by her). Sugarpuss's provocation to the professor, and Stanwyck's to the viewer and to the genre, within an arch and dissimulating context, is to stand there and look genuinely serious. It is acute and puncturing.

Having taken the film (and the situation) to a point of stillness and quiet, and eroticised through restraining (or draining) the comedic, her character then becomes excitable. Sugarpuss says, 'I came on account of you … and not on account of you needed some slang … on account of because I wanted to see you again', and he tells 'Miss O'Shea' that the construction 'on account of because' outrages every grammatical law. This only encourages her. 'So what?', she exclaims, wafting her hand to dismiss, 'I came on account of because I couldn't stop thinking about you after you left my dressing room … On account of because I thought you were big, and cute, and pretty'. It is her last throw of the dice, and it is evidently manipulative, but it sounds frank. As she moves through the adjectives, coming up with them now, like a good liar, she is realising the truth. Rather than delivering the line, moreover, as some tongue-twisting verbal manoeuvre, relishing the cleverness it invites, its tangled, ungrammatical construction comes across as straightforward. Her disguises continue to unveil.

Nevertheless, she hopes her prey will be caught up in her unwieldy sentence. If Potts and Pike, Cooper and Fonda, are barely subjects of the films but objects with which she can play – erotic playthings – they are not easy to get at. They are both tall actors, and she is short, so this is a physical as well as a verbal challenge. She sulks when she realises Potts is too tall to kiss (she is eager to show him what it means to be a 'regular yum-yum type'), and goes to fetch a book to stand on. Supposedly, Stanwyck was less than five and a half feet tall and, as Anthony Lane writes, 'she spent a lot of time onscreen looking upward at her leading men' (2007). Her crackling

'agh-agh' (a variation on 'uh-uh'), which registers that one book will not be platform enough, is one of those scraps of behaviour which is inessential, apparently accidental, throwaway, but is essentially part of who a character is. Such scraps are performed too unselfconsciously to look like 'bits of business'. Even if the words or instructions appear in the script, or are given by the director, the performer integrates them, and discovers their spontaneity. They convey involvement by character and performer. However strategic they *actually* are, they are removed from the conventions of 'acting', and not fully formed or regular enough to be traits or characteristics. They are green shoots creeping through the paving which make the character feel like a person living – now. In such moments, we become conscious that, even in a thoroughly constructed Hollywood studio film, as well as watching characters on film we are observing humans *being*. As she fetches a second book so determinedly, one cannot help feeling that this is the only useful role for books this big, the only meaningful way in which these learned tomes will raise you. She gives a little wobble to test stability, and her words wobble too ('Isn't that juuust tooo bad' is her response to the alarming news that they are Prof. Gurkakoff's cross-reference books). Sugarpuss clutches Potts around the neck, and presses two kisses into him, each one representing a 'yum'. The demonstration of 'yum-yum', which is two 'yum's combined, requires a third kiss more forceful and prolonged. He is stiff and petrified, so they fall over …

For *The Lady Eve*, as for *Ball of Fire*, academic formality, and mastery, as represented by men, in particular the characters played by Cooper and Fonda, should give way. In *The Lady Eve*, Jean, a con woman, played by Stanwyck, spends a lot of time causing Charles Pike, the millionaire son of an ale producer, to collapse. One wonders whether disallowing anything to stand for long is one of Preston Sturges's guiding principles. For Farber, himself impatient with material that smacks of the Weighty and so not unsurprisingly the critic most at home with the director, Sturges is 'the ruthless

showman deliberately rejecting all notions of esthetic weight and responsibility' who finds 'the consistency of serious art, its demand that everything be resolved in terms of a logic of a single mood, repugnant to his temperament and false to life' and where '[t]he witty economy of his movies is maintained by his gifted exploitation of the non sequitur and the perversely unexpected' (2009 [1954]: 462, 466). The film's structure, dividing into two odd halves, might reflect its contradictory impulses. A sophisticated first half gives way, largely, to a second half of less subtle comedy which relies for much of its length on Charles failing to see that the Lady Eve is Jean whom he met on the boat, and who is, as his companion Mugsy (William Demarest) repeatedly declares, '*pos-i-tively* the same dame'. Mistaken identity is a common convention in theatrical comedy (for example, Shakespearean comedy), but it is disconcerting within the less abstracted world of the film (or even, perhaps, within the medium of film). The treatment is also relentless, as if Sturges were revelling in the preposterousness. The fictional events operate in a mood of incredulity and a state of self-sabotage.

In the first half of the film, however, Sturges's incongruities, and Stanwyck's execution of them, are minute and adroit. After Jean first meets Charles by sticking out her leg for him to trip over, and literally whisks him off his feet, she moves, in a few seconds, from angry to impatient to dismissive to formal to bossy. After her indignation, the haste with which she takes his arm is indecent. Once taken, she looks very pleased with herself – she's got her man – and escorts him off with a jaunty limp. Later that night, he is in a state of woozy ecstasy, and his vision is blurred, apparently caused by her perfume. He falls – of course – off the side of a chair and, seated uncomfortably on the floor, he is left staring upwards after his head drops back. This tall, distinguished figure is hypnotised and paralysed, suffering from erotic catatonia. She takes advantage of his position: she is lying next to him on the chair, her cheek tight against his upper cheek, forehead and eye, hugging his head and stroking his

ear and hair. While twisting him this way and that with her words she taunts him physically: sometimes she turns seductively toward him, her lips hovering around the tip of his nose and his lips, caressing his face with her breath. As Kathleen Murphy describes: 'she runs her fingers through his hair with calculated absentmindedness … drops a long nail down into and around his ear, and generally strokes him into a near-swoon' (1990: 35). The film and the actors transform the slapstick ingredients into something more peculiar, where the ungainly and the awkward become arousing. Passivity, delirium, humiliation and contortion: the comic and the erotic, sharing their masochisms, are mischievously intertwined.

This mixed-up mood is ideal for Stanwyck to enact, as Stanley Cavell writes, a 'combination of needling and contradiction and seductiveness' (2004: 308). Jean is elaborating on her ideal partner and she delivers almost every line in a different register, fluctuating with a shameless audacity. At first, she is snappy, 'He's a little short

guy with lots of money'. *Then*, dreamily romantic as she defends her choice, 'What does it matter if he's rich – it's so he'll look up to me so I'll be *his* ideal'. (Her voice fails to acknowledge the cynicism of the line. The apparent non-sequiturs are not only between lines but also between the line and the accompanying attitude.) *Then*, in response to his 'That's a funny kind of reasoning', she says, 'Mmmm – look who's reasoning', and pops her lips, one of those unclassifiable, idiosyncratic bits of behaviour, like the 'agh-agh' reaction that preceded Sugarpuss's kiss of Professor Potts. *Then*, she becomes alert, 'Oh yes – he won't do card tricks!' remembering to make this crucial point clear. *Then*, she softens and slows things down: 'It's not that I mind *yoouur* doing card tricks, Hopsey – it's just that you [pause] naturally wouldn't want [very slowly now] your ideal to do *caaard* tricks'. *Then*, after he says that this ideal should not be hard to find, she quickens, and raises her pitch, haughty but also dismissively streetwise: 'He isn't. That's why he's my ideal'. *Then*, croaky and satisfied: 'What's the sense of having one if you can't ever find him. Mine is a practical ideal. You can find two or three of them in every barbershop getting the works'. *Then*, in response to his irritated, 'Why don't you marry one of them?', she is sharp, and screechy: 'Why would I marry anybody who looked like that?'. There is nothing to worry about, however, because she soon comes over all dreamy again, 'When I marry someone … . I'll want him to sort of take me by surprise'. This is a fine example of Stanwyck's broad tonal palette, but it also exhibits the fluency with which she enables the abrupt and capricious.

This fluency is at the heart of a celebrated scene in film comedy, where Jean views Charles, and all the female admirers who surround him and approach him, through her compact make-up mirror. Before we see the scene through this mirror, the film edits around the lounge presenting a series of simplistic sight gags with each of the women putting it out there and putting it on. One woman takes a big swig of Pike's ale – 'the one that won it for Yale' – with a scrunched-up,

pig-snorting face. She attempts to hide this disgusted response when she turns to grin inanely at Pike (and the camera), but her fake expression is busted by a loud hiccup. Jean usurps this staccato vulgarity: she manufactures continuity and her mirror provides fluent, longer takes. According to Harvey, we see 'a series of silent images, with Jean supplying the thoughts and words, and directions for action, too, of all the people caught there, as if she were the author of the whole event' (1998: 567). She does indeed overlay a 'series of silent images' with her voice track but she is not 'the author' of the 'whole event', because that implies that she orchestrates everything that happens in front of her. The description does not quite capture her responsiveness to, and mocking of, the inevitable, and the comedy of a running commentary – where she sometimes mimics the patter of a sports announcer – with Jean as the barbed commentator. Not only do the events take place before her, they have taken place before, and before that, *so* many times. How else could she be so knowing?

For Maria DiBattista, Jean is 'the prestidigitator who manipulates and directs the images on the screen' (2001: 309). She is drawing upon Cavell's understanding 'that the woman is some kind of stand-in for the role of director' and 'we are informed that this film knows itself to have been written and directed and photographed and edited' (1981: 66). The self-reflexive aspect is over-determined by the fact that the mirror image is not a reflection at all, but a film image, like a mini-screen where the image is being projected (or, anachronistically, in today's terms, like a film playing on a handheld device, such as a mobile phone). So although it is possible to claim, as Cavell does, that we are 'looking through the viewfinder of a camera' (66), as a director might, the experience is more akin to sharing a private and privileged screening (of a predictable film with a clichéd story and characters). She is less a director than an adept critic and satirist.

Sometimes she does give instructions to Fonda, one of the many forms of address she assumes, but the joke is that she pretends to direct, further ironising, and exposing, the situation's predictability. The situation does not need directing, it needs redirecting, through a comic perspective (hence the mirror, through which she can adjust viewpoint). As well as satirising, her energy brings a dead scene to life. So if Stanwyck's Jean does stand in for Sturges, or is a surrogate for him in some way (and he wrote the film especially for Stanwyck), it is because she turns everything around (through the mirror), upsets and undermines, and invigorates with what Farber calls Sturges's 'outraged energy' (467).

The use of a handheld mirror is inspired. In terms of the con, it captures and frames Charles but it also expresses her wish to possess him or, even better, hold him, or hold onto him. He appears small and it makes a little spectacle of him but, at the same time, he is something to be pictured, pampered, and even adored. He is something to behold. In the extreme close-up, her hand is huge in the shot as it holds the mirror so as the 'real' film images substitute

for the reflection, she holds the scene, takes a hold of it. By being able to hold it, and humour it, the scene appears light. DiBattista writes that the 'conventional gesture [of looking into a compact], which normally signals an act of feminine preening and self-absorption, a kind of innocent and socially acceptable narcissism, proves to be the feint that conceals Jean's magical manipulations' (308). A Stanwyck character once again manoeuvres (within) the trappings of female beauty, and through the mirror, with the help of her commentary, she reframes the conventional.

This distinction between directing/authoring and responding/reframing is important because much of the comic effect arises from Jean's commentary moving alertly and swiftly from one observation to the next. She must keep up with the action and we must keep up with her. One knows that the lines are written and learnt, but they test the performer's powers of delivery, and her performance of improvisation. Our knowledge that this is a successful rendering of densely packed dialogue is crucial to the effect but so is our acceptance that it is convincingly made up on the spot (and that this woman is capable of making it up). Like many of the celebrated wordy comedy monologues, the complexity of each line and the brisk pace are composed to tie the tongue but they receive an assured and confident articulation. This impresses, and if well sustained, exhilarates. It is a marvel what the script requires to be squeezed in, and how Stanwyck comfortably finds room for it.

Although this is a monologue, Jean is the immoderately involved narrator and the enthusiastic voice of all the participants. Sometimes she whips-it-up in the third person ('He is returning to his book, he is deeply immersed in it, he sees no-one except …'), *or* instructs the 'characters' directly ('Look over to your left, bookworm … a little further … there!'), *or* speaks, and reacts, for them, after inserting proper nouns, with satirical and surreal motivation ('For Heaven's sake, aren't you Fuzzy Oldhammer I went to manual

training school with in Louisville? Oh, you're not?'), *or* feigns surprise, with pulpy locutions, at their classic moves à la Tex Avery ('Holy Smoke! – the dropped kerchief!'). Pronouns abound and shift subject from clause to clause: one moment the 'me' is Pike ('Now who else is after *me*?'), the next it refers to the emoting commentator ('The suspense is killing *me*'). One hardly notices the different modes of address partly because she delivers it all in a state of sarcastic hyperbole and faux breathless excitation. At the same time, she is disguising what would be jaw-dropping innuendo in the slangy vocabulary and *racy* patter. When a large middle-aged woman tries it on, Jean is shockingly rude, in both senses, asking rhetorically: 'How would you like *that* hanging on your Christmas tree?' Yet, Jean is the one who comes on all offended ('Go sulk in your cabin, go soak your head and see if I care'), allying herself with the rejected suitors. She is putting it on, of course, but it carries undertones of a woman scorned as if Stanwyck was already building in Jean's later rejection (which genuinely upsets her). She lets the indignation seep out of her apparently self-possessed commentary, giving it an unconsciously revealing and prescient aspect.

Innuendo abounds in the film: there are jokes about going 'up the Amazon' and Charles's 'snake'. Jean is invited into his cabin to see his 'snake', and naturally, at the sight of it, she screams in shock, and runs a mile. Rarely nudge-nudge, wink-wink, in *Carry On* style, the performers do not declare, exalt, or celebrate the dirty joke. The necessary disguising by performers for censorship reasons (to circumvent the Code) was a widespread practice in comedies of the period but the camouflage presents Stanwyck with another creative opportunity to modulate. Even when Jean is pointedly suggestive, for example in her cabin when she leans on the shoe chest and asks, 'See anything you like?' – only ostensibly referring to the shoes Charles is picking out for her – the Mae West come-on is tempered with a relaxed mockery of his misplaced attentions. This is not merely playing it straight, on the contrary. At one moment in the evening,

when they are sitting closely together side by side at the card table, he gets all romantic on her ('Do you think they're dancing any place on board?'). Looking away from him she says soberly, 'Don't you think we ought to go to bed?', and the insinuation is proffered as a sensible proposition about getting some rest. Only after finishing the line does she look to be teasing again. She waits a second before turning sharply back towards him and stares into his eyes with a feigned alertness as though pretending to be interested in what he now thinks. Yet, despite this attempt at description, the manner of Jean's behaviour here, even on many viewings, under close scrutiny, is extremely difficult to classify. By beguilingly obscuring the implications, aside from preventing the double meanings from becoming one-note, Stanwyck helps create a world of exquisite deviation and deflection.

The film is at its most sly, and erotically infectious, when it seduces us into taking its double dealing innocently. When Charles kneels at Jean's feet to put on the shoe, DiBattista writes that he suggests 'the somewhat intimate ministrations of a shoe salesman with a leg fetish' *and* the 'romantic, even feudal … knight kneeling in obeisance to his lady' (311). There are *Cinderella* connotations too, as an aristocratic bachelor places a shoe on a working girl whose identity is in doubt. Jean, as con artist and lover, like Sugarpuss, exploits innocence and, unavoidably, discovers it (or rediscovers it) in herself. Harvey refers to 'tough-girl heroines who seem weary of their own toughness: that it's nice to know your way around, all right – but surely nicer in a way *not* to' (573). Charles says, 'You're certainly a funny girl for anybody to meet who's just been up the Amazon for a year' and she retorts 'good thing you weren't up there two years'. She could have treated the line as an obvious wisecrack, sharp, attacking, or sardonic, but although her delivery is wry, it is very dry, subdued, almost sympathetic – *thoughtful*. Later, when Pike very properly covers her thighs by pulling her skirt down, she says a droll 'thank you', somewhat disappointed (that he fails to take advantage of the

invitation), but also surprised and grateful (for his gallantry). In the comic worlds of *Ball of Fire* and *The Lady Eve*, Stanwyck does not simply tell gags or make ordinary phrases funny (like 'thank you'), she nuances them to complicate tone and address. It is how she opens up her characters while keeping them oblique.

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